

OKLAHOMA STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

DATE: June 28, 2001

TIME: 9:00 a.m.

PLACE: Langston University Center
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

PRESENT: Darrel Dominick, Chairman, NRCS
Doug Bane, Cherokee Nation
Erich Wehrenberg, OK Wheat Growers Association
Juli Ridgway, OK Water Resources Board
Don Bartolina, OACD
John Fanta, BIA
Mike Thralls, OCC
Lance Meek, Oklahoma Wildlife Federation
Shawn Lepard, Pro Ag
Ken Williams, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
John Hendrix, Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation
Jack Eckroat, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service
Rod Wanger, Farm Service Agency
Ginger Lyde, Farm Service Agency
Milton Sovo, Caddo Tribe
LaDonna McCowan, Landowners & Tenants Association
Charles Freeman, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture
Kevin Norton, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Chris Stoner, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Suzanne Collier, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Lanny Miller, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Joni Hays, Natural Resources Conservation Service

1. Meeting Called to Order – Darrel Dominick, Chairman

Darrel Dominick, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. All present made introductions by stating their name and agency, organization, or group affiliation. This meeting was held in compliance with the Oklahoma Open Meeting Laws.

2. Review of Minutes – 5/8/01 Meeting – Darrel Dominick, NRCS

Rod Wanger stated that the vote on the 80%/20% split between EQIP Priority Areas and Natural Resource Concerns was not noted in the minutes. As it had been determined to leave the 80%/20% split as is, this fact will be placed in the minutes above Item #5.

Milton Sovo made a motion to approve the minutes with the one correction, and Rod Wanger seconded the motion. The minutes from the meeting held on 5/8/01 were approved.

3. Overview of NRCS Program Activities – Darrel Dominick, NRCS

Darrel Dominick stated that NRCS works closely with the Conservation Districts, OCC, and nation-to-nation with 39 tribes. There was a Tribal Conservation Advisory Committee meeting held last week with representatives from 21 tribes in attendance. NRCS also works with local, state, and federal agencies, and the next annual report on NRCS activities will reflect more on the partnership effort that takes place. The voluntary conservation work that occurs with private landowners now involves more complicated issues with more people involved. The

State Technical Committee is very important to this effort. Downsizing of government continues to be of concern with demands to do more with less; Darrel believes we should do the best with what we have. From 1981 until today, our agency had downsized 45%.

Darrel commented that there is an nationwide effort to get more conservation buffers in place. There are nine RC&D areas; they look at the economic side and promote a large partnering effort. The High Plains RC&D is the newest one, and there are only two counties not covered by an RC&D area. The Small Watershed Program deals with aging watershed structures. NRCS has been working with Congressman Lucas on getting money to work on this issue. Many structures in Oklahoma are reaching the end of their lifespan (40-50 years). A dam safety conference was held this week. In addition to working with FSA on the Conservation Reserve Program, NRCS also administers the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Forestry Incentives Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and Wetlands Reserve Program. In addition, NRCS manages the Conservation Technical Assistance Program which is a very important program that keeps work on a voluntary basis, and not a regulatory basis. The Earth Team Volunteer Program is one in which NRCS will be putting a bigger push on in the future. NRCS has provided assistance to landowners for cleanup from tornadoes, ice storm damage, and infrastructure issues with County Commissioners through the Emergency Watershed Program (EWP). Two large jobs costing approximately one million dollars each through the EWP are the Kickapoo Nation on the east side of Oklahoma City, and the City of McCloud to save a sewage treatment plant. Additional range conservationists and specialists have been hired by NRCS for the Grazing Lands Assistance Program, and Oklahoma is recognized as the best in the country for this program's accomplishments. Darrel stated he is proud of NRCS's efforts with the Grazing Lands Coalition. Darrel also commented that the Plant Materials Program is the "hidden gem" in the agency, working with universities and researchers. There are 26 plant material centers whose work has influenced the country. The Rehabilitation Program involves 2,100 flood control structures in Oklahoma, and 20% of the structures in the nation are in our state. The Rural Abandoned Mine Program is authorized for 16 counties in eastern Oklahoma. Funding for this program has not been released since 1995. The Soil Survey Program is the critical foundation for all that NRCS does. Soil surveys are being updated with new information and changes, and the survey will be placed on a CD rom in the future. Darrel closed his discussion by commenting that he definitely believes in partnering to keep things on a voluntary basis instead of regulatory.

4. Soil & Water Conservation Assistance Program (SWCA) - Kevin Norton, NRCS

Kevin stated that this program is authorized under the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000, and the NRCS State Conservationist, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, will determine eligible practices, practice lifespans, and ranking criteria. Twenty million dollars was set aside nationally for SWCA outside of EQIP priority areas. It is the intent of Congress to work at the backlog of EQIP priority concerns, and a website (policy.nrcs.usda.gov) is available to access the policy manual and all documents. The objectives of the program are almost identical to EQIP. SWCA will be administered by NRCS, and FSA will disburse payments to participants. Eligibility is the same as in EQIP, and all land uses are eligible. Land may only be considered for participation if the land is privately owned; tribal, allotted, ceded, or Indian Trust land; or publicly owned land where included with participant's operating unit and under private control for the contract period, conservation practices will benefit nearby adjacent land, and there is written authorization from the government landowner to apply the practices. Land under other conservation programs is eligible if SWCA is being used to treat a different natural resource concern or provide a higher or improved level of treatment. SWCA is available outside of a designated EQIP priority area; therefore, only 72 counties in Oklahoma can participate. Eligible and ineligible practices for SWCA mirror EQIP. There will be a continuous signup period for SWCA, but must be a separate and distinct signup period from EQIP and WHIP. For the contract area, the field level is the smallest increment and there has to be a conservation plan. There is no flexible bidding; it is a 75% cost-share level, and \$50,000/contract cannot be exceeded. It was first thought that SWCA would be a 1-3 year program bringing in approximately one million dollars in the state; therefore, NRCS could send allocations to the county level with selected practices, providing more local flexibility. However, SWCA is a 5-10 year program, with only a \$430,800 allocation; $\$430,800 \div 72 \text{ counties} = \$5983/\text{county}$. The contracts must be developed and the money obligated by September 30, 2001. The backlog list for EQIP statewide concerns includes 234 applications for soil resources for \$1,202,943, 26 applications for water resources for \$220,711, and 302 applications for grazing lands for \$2,048,890. Money already obligated for soils is \$238,351; water - \$59,588; grazing lands - \$238,351; and fish & wildlife - \$59,588.

Kevin provided the ranking list for water resources, and commented that approximately 18 more applications totaling \$143,496 could be funded for waste management systems. This would involve Cherokee, Craig, Haskell, Hughes, LeFlore, and Mayes counties, and \$15,000 is the highest contract amount. Kevin commented that it can run up to \$8,000 to get stack sheds in compliance, and it would also involve application of animal waste, soil analysis, grazing management systems, and water development. There does not have to be a statewide signup for SWCA, allocations can be issued to counties. The question was asked if waste management is covered under another federal program, and answered that there are a small amount of 319 water quality demonstration projects. However, these applications do not come under the 319 program except those in LeFlore County. There would be a signup in the counties approved for the program; individuals on the backlog lists would have to go through the process and sign up. The ranking list for soil resources was also provided, and Kevin stated that 58 additional contracts could be funded in 25 counties in central and western Oklahoma, involving 8,550 acres and \$326,730. The largest amount funded for a contract would be \$31,000. Practice codes on the list are: Pasture Planting (512), Range Seeding (550), Windbreak – Shelterbelt (380), Pond (378), Grassed Waterway (412), and Terrace System (600). The Grazing Lands ranking list was provided next, possibly funding 58 applications for \$318,975 in 10 counties: Dewey, Kingfisher, Kiowa, Lincoln, Logan, Noble, Pawnee, Payne, Washington, and Woods. 25 of the 58 applications would be in Payne and Pawnee counties.

Rod Wanger asked how much technical assistance money will be offered, and Kevin responded that we will probably get 16%, with \$6.40 going to FSA for every check written. Rod also commented that he believes producers should be provided another opportunity in non-priority areas to receive money from this program. He feels money will be targeted somewhere where it should not be targeted. He thinks it is frustrating for producers to not be able to apply, and that the money should be split between districts and let them manage the money. The districts could accept applications and rank them as he believes this will have a negative effect if only a few counties are focused on.

Kevin Norton stated that we would be working from a known existing backlog list of applicants. He commented that there is not enough money involved to incur the amount of work and frustration involved with getting training scheduled, publicizing the program 2-3 weeks in advance, conducting signups, evaluating applications, conducting field visits, developing ranking lists, and developing contracts by the deadline of September 30th. Land area could be added by involving all counties, but they would still not receive much money.

Jack Eckroat asked if it is possible to restrict the program to people who have already applied with the resource issues already in place, and Kevin Norton answered that the program has to be announced and a signup held. This program is funded as a one year program and there is no indication as to whether it will continue. Mike Thralls commented that the state cost-share program is an annual program with an annual signup; they do go down the signup list if producers do not fulfill their contract. Mike stated he is sympathetic to what Kevin Norton proposes in the interest of time and efficiency, and he feels a little more money should be put into the water resources concern.

Mike Thralls made a motion to place \$180,000 into the water resources concern, \$125,000 into the soil resources concern, and \$125,000 into the grazing lands concern, utilizing the existing ranking lists with the understanding that a county will not be issued an allocation of less than \$10,000. Don Bartolina seconded the motion.

John Hendrix asked if all applicants for fish and wildlife concerns were taken care of this fiscal year, and Kevin Norton responded that all eligible applications were funded in EQIP and the concern was also taken care of through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program recently. A comment was also made that addressing the red cedar issue also helps wildlife. Milton Sovo asked if the new Priority Areas had been funded, and Kevin Norton answered that they are already taken care of and are being worked as almost all have finished their ranking list. It was questioned as to what percentage of the total applications received we received on EQIP statewide concerns were funded, and Kevin Norton responded that only 15% had been funded and if we adopt the motion, it would move it up to about 25%. LaDonna McCowan asked what the probability is for the applicants on the ranking lists to be funded next fiscal year, and Kevin Norton stated that some will re-apply, some will give up, and new applicants will apply, but if they stay on the list, eventually they should be funded. It was also questioned why we would not consider funding a county if the allocation was less than \$10,000, and Kevin Norton responded that it would just not be prudent to issue an allocation of a small amount to a county. Mike Thralls commented that their agency held a statewide signup, received a tremendous amount of applications, only funded a few

applications, and increased the frustration level. He stated that we need to get more money in the statewide concerns; this is always discussed at the State Technical Committee Meeting, and he feels this is the best way to handle this amount of money in this short amount of time. Kevin Norton commented that this would move this to a 75%/25% between priority areas and statewide concerns. John Hendrix commented that he would like for the State Technical Committee to revisit the fish and wildlife concern next year if money for this program still exists. Darrel Dominick stated that the Farm Bill is moving forward so programs will be funded differently and more money for EQIP is being discussed.

A vote was taken on the motion to place \$180,000 into the water resources concern, \$125,000 into the soil resources concern, and \$125,000 into the grazing lands concern, utilizing the existing ranking lists with the understanding that a county will not be issued an allocation of less than \$10,000.

Vote: The motion passed.

The following table details the allocations which will be provided to nineteen counties:

Field_Office	County	Soil Resources	Water Resources	Grazing Lands
Tahlequah	Cherokee		\$20,000	
Lawton	Comanche	\$12,000		
Vinita	Craig		\$10,000	
Taloga	Dewey			\$10,000
Enid	Garfield	\$20,000		
Chickasha	Grady	\$22,000		
Stigler	Haskell		\$35,000	
Altus	Jackson	\$10,000		
Kingfisher	Kingfisher	\$10,000		
Hobart	Kiowa			\$10,000
Poteau	LeFlore		\$105,000	
Chandler	Lincoln			\$20,000
Guthrie	Logan	\$10,000		
Pryor	Mayes		\$10,000	
Miami	Ottawa	\$10,000		
Pawnee	Pawnee			\$55,000
Stillwater	Payne			\$20,000
Frederick	Tillman	\$31,000		
Alva	Woods			\$10,000
		\$125,000	\$180,000	\$125,000
		Total \$430,000		

Kevin Norton stated that there could be a compressed practice list for this program with the possibility of utilizing Prescribed Burning, Mechanical Cedar Control, Ponds, Wells, and Fences. He asked if NRCS could be given the latitude to decide which practices to include for the program.

Mike Thralls made a motion to give NRCS the latitude to decide which practices to include for the SWCA program. Milton Sovo seconded the motion.

A vote was taken on the motion to give NRCS the latitude to decide which practices to include for the SWCA program. The motion passed.

The following practices are eligible for the SWCA program:

Waste Storage Facility	Brush Management
Composting Facility	Contour Buffer Strips
Prescribed Burning	Critical Area Planting
Waste Treatment Lagoon	Diversion
Pond	Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment

Fence	Field Border
Riparian Forest Buffer	Filter Strip
Firebreak	Grade Stabilization Structure
Grassed Waterway	Herbaceous Wind Barriers
Irrigation Water Conveyance, Pipeline, High-Pressure	Irrigation Water Conveyance, Pipeline, Low-Pressure
Irrigation System, Microirrigation	Lined Waterway or Outlet
Pasture and Hay Planting	Pipeline
Range Planting	Animal Trails and Walkways
Structure for Water Control	Nutrient Management
Terrace	Trough or Tank
Underground Outlet	Water and Sediment Control Basin
Water Well	Stream Crossing

John Hendrix made a motion to revisit fish and wildlife concerns next year as a funding opportunity if this program is available. Mike Thralls seconded the motion.

A vote was taken on the motion to revisit fish and wildlife concerns next year as a funding opportunity if this program is available. The motion passed.

5. Adjournment – Darrel Dominick

The meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m.